

In the past, government officials have privately said they like dealing with the Legion as they feel it represents veterans' interests. It also has a well-defined membership and holds official meetings.

The newer advocacy veterans groups counter that the Legion represents mainly elderly, retired military personnel who fought during the Second World War and in Korea.

Many of the advocacy veterans groups have less formal organi-

zation and varying participation; and unlike the Legion, they don't charge membership fees. None of the groups has offices; instead they are run out of the homes of their volunteers.

At one point, Veteranvoice.info was sending its newsletter free to 100,000 registered subscribers until it couldn't afford to continue. Veterans of Canada has more than 8,000 registered veterans members. Canadian Veterans Advocacy doesn't count its supporters and doesn't actively canvass for members.

Still, such groups are organized, technologically savvy, and can communicate quickly with fellow veterans and the public about government policy.

In 2010, Blais organized protests against the Conservative government in 15 cities, drawing several thousand veterans angry about delays in receiving services and inadequate benefits. The organizing efforts were done via the Internet and phone and sent shock waves through government, which had never faced such widespread discontent in the veterans community. Other smaller rallies since have also been organized using social media.

Based on consultations with veterans by phone, email and Facebook, CVA has published a list of goals it is pursuing, including bringing changes to the New Veterans Charter and improving benefits for veterans' widows. The registered non-profit group has also set up an online repository of difficult-to-find government information outlining specific programs

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In January, new Veterans Affairs Minister Erin O'Toole contacted Mike Blais, founder of Canadian Veterans Advocacy, with a message: Blais should change the structure of his group, known for organizing protests and vigorously challenging the Conservatives, to be more like the Royal Canadian Legion. O'Toole said he wanted to deal with organizations that have general meetings and a more official structure, "not just a Facebook page." The Citizen confirmed the contents of O'Toole's message.

"What he really wants is for us to shut up and toe the line," said Blais.

"The message from the Conservatives is that they don't want to deal with anyone who is criticizing them, especially in an election year," said Sean Bruyee, an Ottawa veteran who has in the past represented Veterans of Canada at the advisory panel.

As word of the advisory panel cold shoulder hit the Internet, O'Toole went on Twitter, stating that "no one is cut off." He also said he has reached out to different organizations and diverse veterans' voices and will continue to do so.

In an email to the Citizen, O'Toole's spokeswoman, Kayleigh Kanoza, said the minister's contact with Canadian Veterans Advocacy indicates the organization is still considered one of the "stakeholders" on the veterans file.

Kanoza did not say why the three groups were excluded from the stakeholders' panel in November, nor whether they would be asked back. O'Toole was not available for an interview.

But after some veterans and opposition MPs started questioning why Veterans Affairs seemed to be freezing out groups who didn't agree with Conservative policy, O'Toole on Jan. 27 left Blais a message on the Canadian Veterans Advocacy Facebook page suggesting the group meet with his officials.

The political stakes are high for the Conservatives, who at one time enjoyed largely unqualified support from veterans. But changes to veterans' benefits, in addition to the closures of nine of 32 Veterans Affairs district offices across the country, shook that support. The emergence of the advocacy groups — particularly Blais's organization — has fuelled the discontent.